

I 29.45 11

Robert E. Lee
and
Fort Pulaski

NATIONAL
PARK SERVICE
POPULAR STUDY
SERIES

HISTORY No. 11

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, Washington
Price 10 cents

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
POPULAR STUDY SERIES

History No. 11

Robert E. Lee
and
Fort Pulaski



1941

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
THE INTERIOR, HAROLD L. ICKES, *Secretary*

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, NEWTON B. DRURY, *Director*



*Robert E. Lee, a young Lieutenant of Engineers, U. S. Army, as he appeared about 1831, shortly after the completion of his assignment to Cockspur Island.
Signal Corps, U. S. Army Photo*

Robert E. Lee and Fort Pulaski

*By Rogers W. Young, Assistant Historical Technician
Branch of Historic Sites*

An Apprenticeship on Cockspur Island

DESTINED to be one of the most illustrious graduates of West Point, a young Virginian awaited assignment in the mid-summer of 1829 to his first tour of duty in the Army. The recent honor of finishing second in the Academy class of 1829 had been forgotten in his intense grief over the death of his mother on July 10. This sad disruption of his mother's home at Georgetown, in the District of Columbia, soon led him to a temporary sojourn with his friends and relatives in Fauquier County, Va. Here Brevet Second Lt. Robert E. Lee received, on August 11, his first official orders from Brig. Gen. Charles Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, that he must "by the middle of November next, report to Maj. Samuel Babcock of the corps of Engineers for duty at Cockspur Island, in the Savannah River, Ga."¹

The assignment to Cockspur Island, at the mouth of the Savannah, must certainly have held little allure for the young lieutenant of Engineers. The undertaking to build a fort on this marshy and isolated island was then of comparatively recent origin. The commanding officer on the island, Major Babcock, had begun his preliminary surveys in December of the previous year, and the project had been suspended in June 1829 for the hot months, while he was on leave in the North. A stupendous task yet awaited the superior and his youthful subordinate. But orders were to be obeyed, and, on September 27, Lieutenant Lee notified General Gratiot that he would remain in Fauquier County until late in October, when he would depart for Savannah.

Traveling by coastal steamer, the new engineer officer reached the thriving old southern city early in November. Then the most

important port and chief city in Georgia, Savannah had the genuine unhurried charm of the deep ante bellum South. The youthful lieutenant could hardly have found imperative duties at Cockspur Island immediately upon his arrival, since Major Babcock had not yet returned from the North, and the project, in a state of suspension, was in the hands of an overseer. Fortunately, young Robert had staunch and hospitable friends in the Mackays, one of the fine old Savannah families. Jack Mackay, classmate and close friend of Lee, was then stationed at the Oglethorpe Barracks, in the city, with the garrison of United States artillery. The 5 or 6 weeks which were to intervene between Lee's arrival and the return of Major Babcock were not to be idle ones after all. Under pleasant circumstances, Lee was to meet the best society of Savannah while awaiting his superior.²

Major Babcock reached Savannah on December 23, 1829, and the project, still in a preparatory stage, was soon resumed. Lee's superior, whom he now met for the first time, was an aging officer in the Engineer Corps. A graduate of the Military Academy in 1808, Major Babcock had already seen some 20 years of active service on widely scattered projects and was now tiring rapidly. Apparently his health was then in a very poor condition. Under such circumstances, the first officer to assist him with the Cockspur fort project would be expected to shoulder a large share of the responsibility.

During the month of January 1830, Lieutenant Lee, acting in his capacity as assistant engineer, took over much of the direction of the work. Construction of quarters upon the island for Major Babcock, the workmen, and himself had to be rushed. A system of drainage and embankments for the island was commenced. Construction on the principal wharf was started. As the month closed, the 22-year-old lieutenant was delegated to prepare a map, which he entitled "Sketch exhibiting the actual state of Cockspur Island and the operations for Jan. 1830." This sketch (of which a reproduction is included in this booklet), first of the rare Lee

Engineer Grade
Sergeants
and Engineers &
Artillery Guards &
First Artillerymen,
2d Yards, Marines
available in each port.

Engineering Department
Washington August 11, 1874
Present your thanks to the Corps of Engineers will
refort to the Department of War this day
the 1st of September next, for duty at Fort Sumter, &
will be paid in each port.

76

President Grant. Robert E. Lee, of the Corps of Engineers
will be in the middle of November next, report to Major
General B. F. Butler at Cockspur Island, in the Savannah
River, Georgia.

(Signed) R. E. Lee
Major General U. S. A.

Facsimile of the War Department copy of the Army's first orders to Robert E. Lee, after his graduation from West Point, which assigned him to duty on Cockspur Island. The first paragraph relates to Lieutenant Mason. National Archives Photo

drawings made on Cockspur Island, was semitopographical in nature, and as its title stated, showed not only the work accomplished, but the work projected as well. The shore of the island was outlined, and marshy and high ground indicated. The partially finished quarters, the beacon, and the revenue boathouse were shown. Also indicated were the proposed sites of the fort and advanced battery, and the location of the projected wharf and system of drainage ditches and embankments.

Opportunity for gaining practical engineering experience was thus first presented to the young lieutenant, and he did not fail to accept it, however difficult the conditions. Cockspur Island did not then, nor does it today, present an easy area for engineering operations. Essentially a mud and marsh island, containing a few low sand ridges, Cockspur demanded patience, skill, and strength from Lieutenant Lee. The stalwart young officer had a physique and mind equal to the task, however, and apparently trampled with little perturbation through the mud and marsh of Cockspur. His endurance in the chill mud and water, during the daily surveying routine is said to have been the everlasting wonder of a particular young lady in Virginia, who subsequently became his wife.³ These trying months on Cockspur must certainly have aided in the maturing of young Robert E. Lee to that calmness of purpose and quiet ability which characterized him in later life.

Major Babcock, who seems to have been somewhat chary of praise, apparently had realized the ability of his young assistant by the end of their first month's association. While he characterized Lieutenant Lee as "in a measure inexperienced," he found the young officer "active and intelligent" and had already delegated to him one of the most important, difficult, and thankless of post tasks. On February 1, 1830, Major Babcock notified Col. George Gibson, Commissary General of Subsistence, that he had "appointed B[revet] Lieut. R. E. Lee of the Engrs. acting assistant commissary of Subsistence of the Post under my command."

Drawer 70.
Sheet 3.



Situations.

Sketch, exhibiting the
actual state of Cockspur Is.
and the operations for San.

1830

References

- a. Slipper Fort
- b. Advanced Batteries
- c. Major Babcock's Quarters
- d. Lieut. Lee's Quarters
- e. Revenue Boat House
- f. Roads
- g. Major Workman's Quarters
- h. Laborer's Quarters
- i. Ditch and Embankment, with valve sluice
- 123rd Creek
- 111. Drawings
- o. Wharf 1830

Projected embankment & aqueduct after

ordinary floods, or even the gales.

- q. Rest of water-piping from river end.

Drawing No 10 - 2

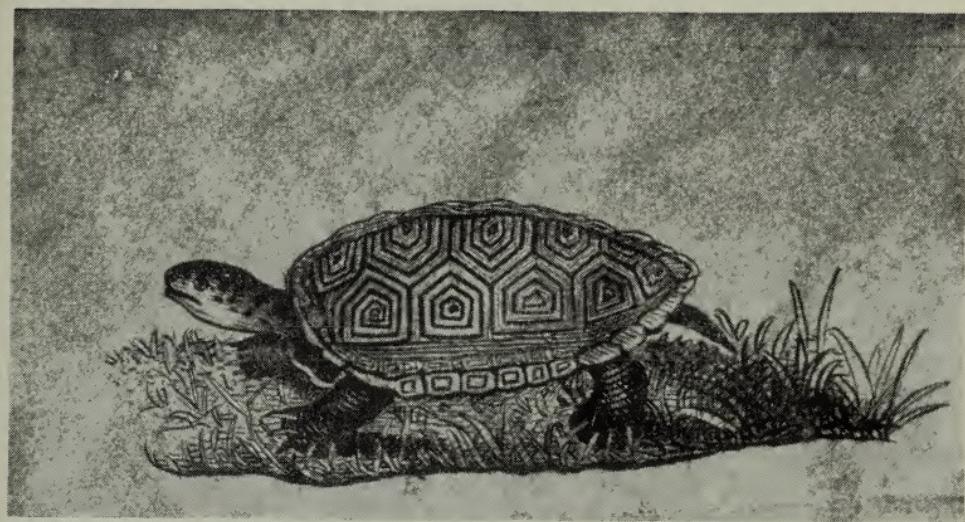
Eng'd Sept
1830
Rec'd from Major G. Babcock
with his letter dated December 1st 1830
(B912)

Aside from the interesting fact that this sketch was drawn on Cockspur Island by young Lieutenant Lee in January 1830, it is of especial value since it locates the exact site of his quarters, as indicated by the block faintly labeled "d," immediately above the block labeled "c"

During February and March, in addition to his new responsibility, Lee carried on his routine engineering duties in connection with the development of the drainage and embankment system for the island. What leisure time as he found was occupied by trips to Savannah, with the pleasant social life of his friends there, and with preparing sketches and writing personal letters.⁴ Opportunities for such diversions became more rare, however, as the early spring advanced. Major Babcock's health was perceptibly failing day by day, and his young assistant's duties became increasingly heavier in consequence.

Progress on the construction of the temporary quarters reached a point early in May which allowed their occupation, and, for the first time, headquarters could be established on Cockspur. At the end of each of the months of February, March, and April 1830, Lieutenant Lee had revised his sketch of the condition of operations on the island, in order to show the progress on the buildings, the dikes, and the drainage ditches. From these can be traced the steps in the finishing of the officers' and workmens' quarters, the completion of the first main wharf on the north channel, and the beginning of the excavation on the proposed site of the fort. During these months, Lee gained much valuable experience in the handling and management of comparatively large crews of workmen, both white and black.

Operations on Cockspur during the early summer of 1830 were not to continue long after the establishment of headquarters there. Major Babcock had signified his intention, earlier in the year, of continuing the project throughout the summer, but early in July he informed General Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, that two of the "most eminent Physicians" of Savannah had recommended him "to remove as soon as possible" from the heat, fever, and mosquitoes of Cockspur, and that he would "leave it with Lt. Lee forthwith, agreeably to your instructions." Babcock was really quite seriously ill, and he left the island, never to return.



Rare sketch of the terrapin and alligator made by Lieutenant Lee on Cockspur Island. Copies of this sketch were apparently given by Lee to members of both the Mackay and Minis families, of Savannah, Ga., whose descendants still own the originals

Lieutenant Lee journeyed to Virginia, where he spent the summer with friends. Fortunately, these friends lived close to the home of a certain young lady in whom he had long had an ardent interest. The home was Arlington, the residence of George Washington Parke Custis and his wife, and the young lady was their daughter, Mary Custis.⁵ He apparently spent much of his summer eloquently improving his suit, and the necessity of returning to Cockspur in the late autumn brought an all too abrupt ending to such a pleasant vacation. He reached Savannah by steam packet from New York on the night of November 10.

A bewildering condition on Cockspur confronted the young Engineer officer. When he had left in the previous July, the system of embankments designed to keep tidal waters off the proposed site had been nearly finished, and was intact, while many of the drainage ditches had been completely opened. But now a recent gale had created havoc with these works. The situation was one requiring immediate action, in order to save the project from irreparable harm. Lee had to face it, and alone, as Major Babcock had not yet returned from the North.

He did not hesitate in this exigency, but plunged immediately into the necessary repairs. The main embankment protecting the fort site was broken, and the dike erected "across the mouth of the canal that drained the ditches on the site of the fort," had been completely undermined and swept into the river. The main drainage canal was filled with mud and debris. The main wharf appeared damaged beyond repair. With the help of the small crew of workmen, left on the island during the summer, the young officer first made repairs to the main embankment, enlarging it for protection against future storms. This work was none too soon, as early in December another small hurricane raged up and down the Georgia coast. December 1 found much of the embankments replaced, and the reopening of the choked canals projected.

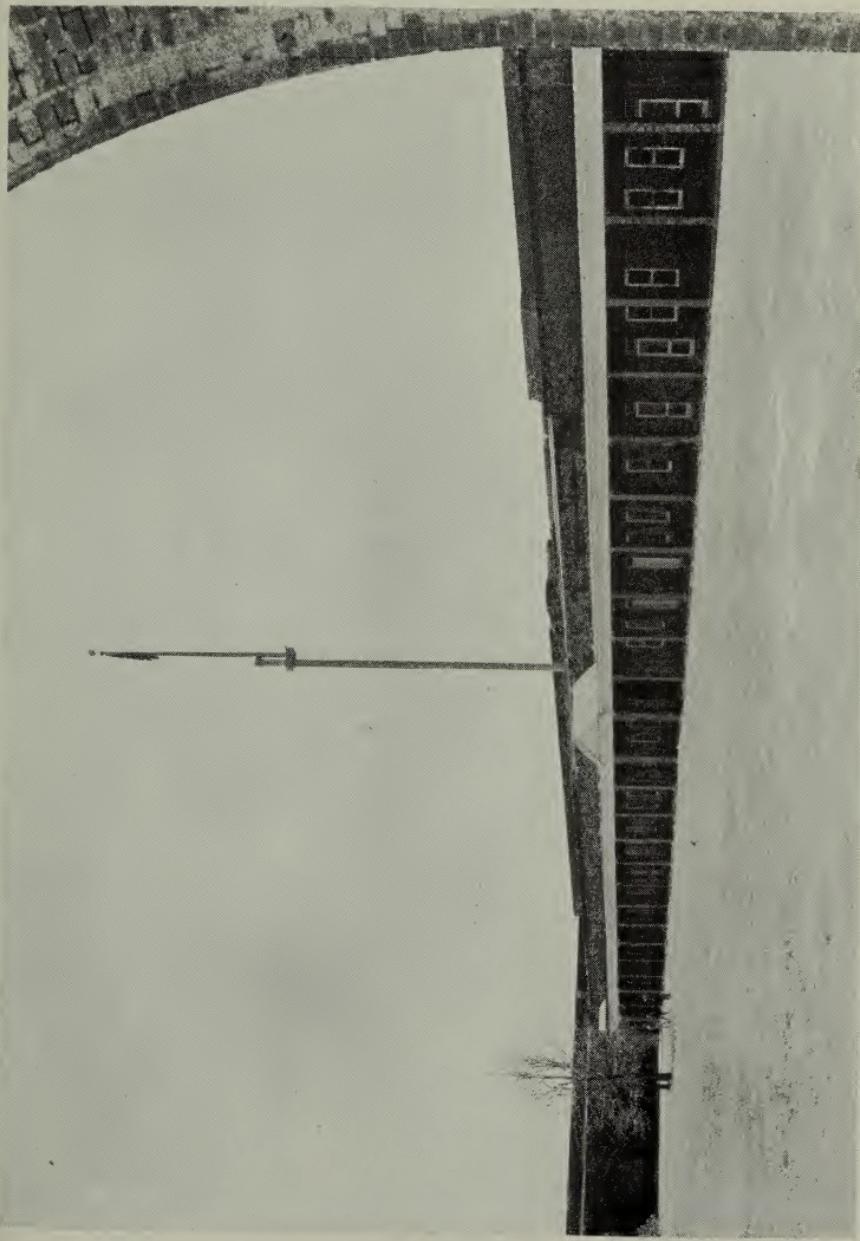


Wartime sketch of the interior and rear wall of Fort Pulaski showing defense measures undertaken at the direction of Gen. Robert E. Lee on his last visit to the fort on November 11, 1861, to prepare the structure for the bombardment in April 1862; including the use of heavy timbers, or "blindages," earth embankments, and trenches in the parade to stop cannonballs

The concern apparently caused the young engineer officer by his superior's continued absence was shortly to be relieved. The Engineer Department, in a letter dated December 20, 1830, notified Lieutenant Lee that Major Babcock had been replaced as superintendent of the fort project on Cockspur Island by First Lt. Joseph K. F. Mansfield. Two days later, Major Babcock's resignation from the Corps of Engineers was accepted by the Secretary of War. Lieutenant Mansfield, who was hardly a year older than Lee, was 4 years his assistant's senior in point of service with the Corps of Engineers, and had already gained much experience with fortification problems at Fort Hamilton, New York Harbor; Fort Johnson, Charleston (S. C.) Harbor; and Fort Monroe, Va. Ordered "to take charge of the construction of the Fort on Cockspur Island Geo," on December 18, 1830, Lieutenant Mansfield, arrived at his post and assumed command on January 21, 1831.

The new superintendent for the Cockspur fort now fell heir to the administrative disorder existing on the project as a result of the inefficiency of the commanding officer who preceded him. Poor, sick Babcock apparently had been very lax in his supervision of the project and had allowed his office routine and records to lapse into chaos. General fiscal affairs appeared hopelessly tangled. Office records were disarranged, or totally missing. Contracts had been made orally, or no record retained on regularly executed ones. Construction plans were conspicuously missing. Not having been charged with the supervision of the details which Lieutenant Mansfield now found in error, Lee could offer little assistance. He gave some aid, however, in untangling the affairs and in one instance presented his opinion in writing on the fraudulence of a timber contract.

Despite the general chaotic conditions, Lieutenant Mansfield took early measures to reopen operations on the island, which had now virtually ceased. On January 23, he informed General Gratiot that he had "directed Lt. Lee to make a Survey and Plan



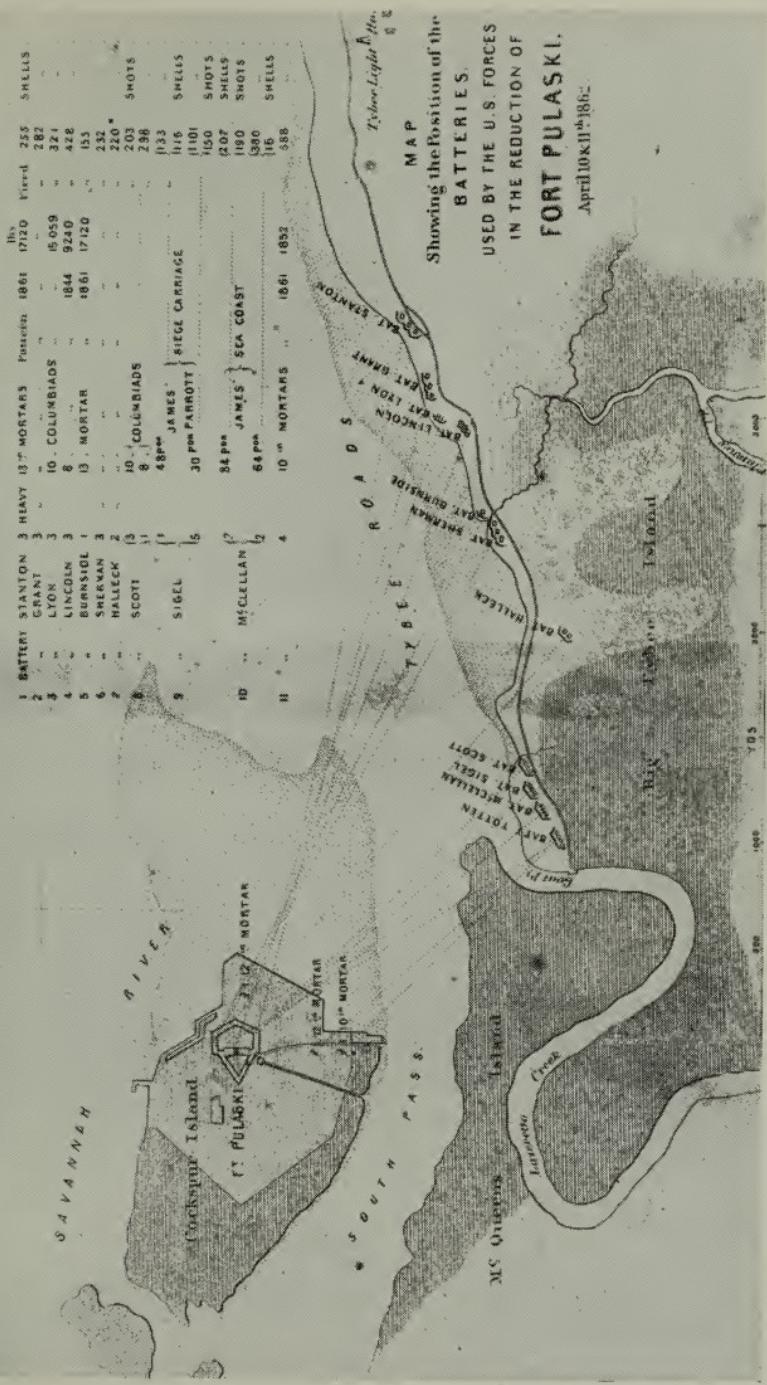
A view of the reconstructed portico along the rear wall of Fort Pulaski, the original of which General Lee directed to be taken down in November 1861, when he personally issued instructions to prepare the fort for siege

of the Island and the additions to it by Major Babcock, which with his zeal and industry will occupy but a few days and then the site and commencement of the body of the work will immediately be examined, fixed and take place."

In the same letter, he brought to the attention of General Gratiot the necessity for a change in the original foundation plans of the fort, owing to the nature of the soil conditions on the island, and asked permission to design a new plan based on his own observations. A few weeks later, the Engineer Department authorized Mansfield to make a soil examination of Cockspur Island, instructing him to make a full report of his observations so that the Department could advise the changes thought necessary in the foundation plans.

Since his survey work did not now occupy all of his time, Lieutenant Lee again began his trips up the river to Savannah. His friend, Jack Mackay, had in the meanwhile been assigned to duty away from the city. Of the three Mackay sisters with whom young Robert had spent many gay hours, Margaret was now married. Catherine and Eliza gave him the usual delightful welcome, however. Near by the hospitable old Mackay home, on Broughton Street, was the residence of the Isaac Minis family. Here two beautiful daughters always were glad to entertain the handsome young lieutenant from Cockspur Island.⁶ These charming hours in the spring of 1831 were numbered, as Lee was soon to learn.

Meanwhile, on Cockspur the work of the survey and soil examination was producing results. On February 26, Lieutenant Mansfield reported conclusively that the existing soil composition would not provide a sufficient base for the fort's foundation, as originally designed. Shortly afterwards, the Department notified him that Captain Delafield, of the Engineer Corps, who was somewhat experienced with problems similar to that at Cockspur would be ordered to report to Cockspur at an early date for a joint conference.



The Federal batteries on Tybee Island directed a converging fire on Fort Pulaski, a mile distant; the rifled cannon in the batteries at the mouth of Lazaretto Creek breached the walls in 24 hours

The survey of Cockspur Island undertaken by Lieutenant Lee was completed early in March 1831. He incorporated the results in a sketch entitled "Map of Cockspur Island, and position of Fort Pulaski," which was forwarded to the Engineer Department on March 8. This sketch exhibited a thorough survey of the island, gave the high water line and fixed features of the terrain, showed the positions of the dikes, sluices, and embankments as actually existing, located all of the temporary buildings, quarters, boat-houses, and shops, and clearly indicated "the site of the fort as laid down by Major Babcock." In addition to finishing this survey, Lee had been engaged also in the supervision of the new excavations for the foundations of the fort, a task which was to consume most of his time during the early part of April as well.

As March 1831 drew to an end, the Engineer Department apparently decided that as a suspension of the operations on Cockspur Island appeared imminent, there was no necessity for two valuable Engineer officers remaining in comparative idleness. The Engineer Corps was then very small, projects were many, and a vigorous young officer of Lee's ability was too valuable to allow his inactivity on Cockspur. Accordingly, on March 26, General Gratiot requested Mansfield to order Lee to Hampton Roads, Va., as soon as practicable if the project could dispense with his services.

Meanwhile, Captain Delafield had arrived for conferences with Lieutenant Mansfield on the redesigning of the foundation plans for the fort, and Lee's services could not immediately be relinquished. Lee realized, however, that his transfer to Hampton Roads was only the matter of a few days. About this time he wrote the following charming farewell letter to the fair Mackay girls, then visiting in South Carolina, which is delightfully tinged with that light-heartedness characteristic of youth the world over and in all ages, when discussing among themselves their own fortunes and the actions of their superiors:

Cockspur, Wednesday [April] 13th, 1831.

There has been but one redeeming circumstance in the occurrences of [this] day Miss Eliza & that has been the arrival of your letter. Indeed I have been dreadfully harassed by these two men, who call themselves Engineers. For you must know that Capt. Delafield has arrived & is in high consultation about Foundations, Grillage, Piles & what not. And I have made them more little troublesome plans & worse calculations about weight, cost, etc. of Masonry, lime, sand & such stuff than I intend to do tomorrow. And that's the certain of it. Will you believe that they are still at it, & have just touched upon cranes, With "Lee give us a sketch of that?" But I happened to have my watch in my hand & seeing that it was ten minutes to 11 P. M. says: "Yes Capt tomorrow" And then I takes up this table & placed it by the fire, with pen ink & paper. And I will leave them to themselves, & they shall leave us to ourselves . . . But Miss Eliza, this parting with all in Broughton St. is dreadful . . . Perhaps, owing to Capt. D[elafield]'s arrival I shall be obliged to stay longer. Perhaps I can get to Beaufort. Perhaps your two weeks will be *out* next Tuesday, Perhaps I shall be taken sick. . . . I have not yet fixed upon the day I shall go or how . . .

The last part of the letter was addressed particularly to Catherine, and in referring to one of his sketches of the terrapin and alligator, which he had drawn on Cockspur Island, says:

What a convenient little memory you have got Miss Catherine. "As I promised! [which probably refers to chiding by Catherine because he had not previously sent her the sketch]. Do you mean it? Well then I will keep it [the promise]. Recollect you have been *owing* me a drawing (And some other things too) for a long time. So you cannot blame me if I take advantage of my good Fortune. But if *you* are particularly anxious to have this one [sketch], I will exchange . . . I will not distress *you* any longer Miss C[atherine] by the thought of keeping me from my "soft repose" ("of manner") So good night &

Yours
truly
R. E. Lee⁷

His transfer from Cockspur Island came soon afterwards. Lieutenant Mansfield had advised General Gratiot, on April 4, that he would have to retain Lee for a few days, after which his

young assistant would be ordered to Hampton Roads. As soon as the young lieutenant had finished his survey drawings, and the necessary assistance at Mansfield's conference with Captain Delafield, he was ordered by his superior, on April 21, 1831, to proceed to Old Point Comfort, Va., and to report to Captain Talcott for duty. On that date, Lieutenant Mansfield sent an official communication to General Gratiot stating:

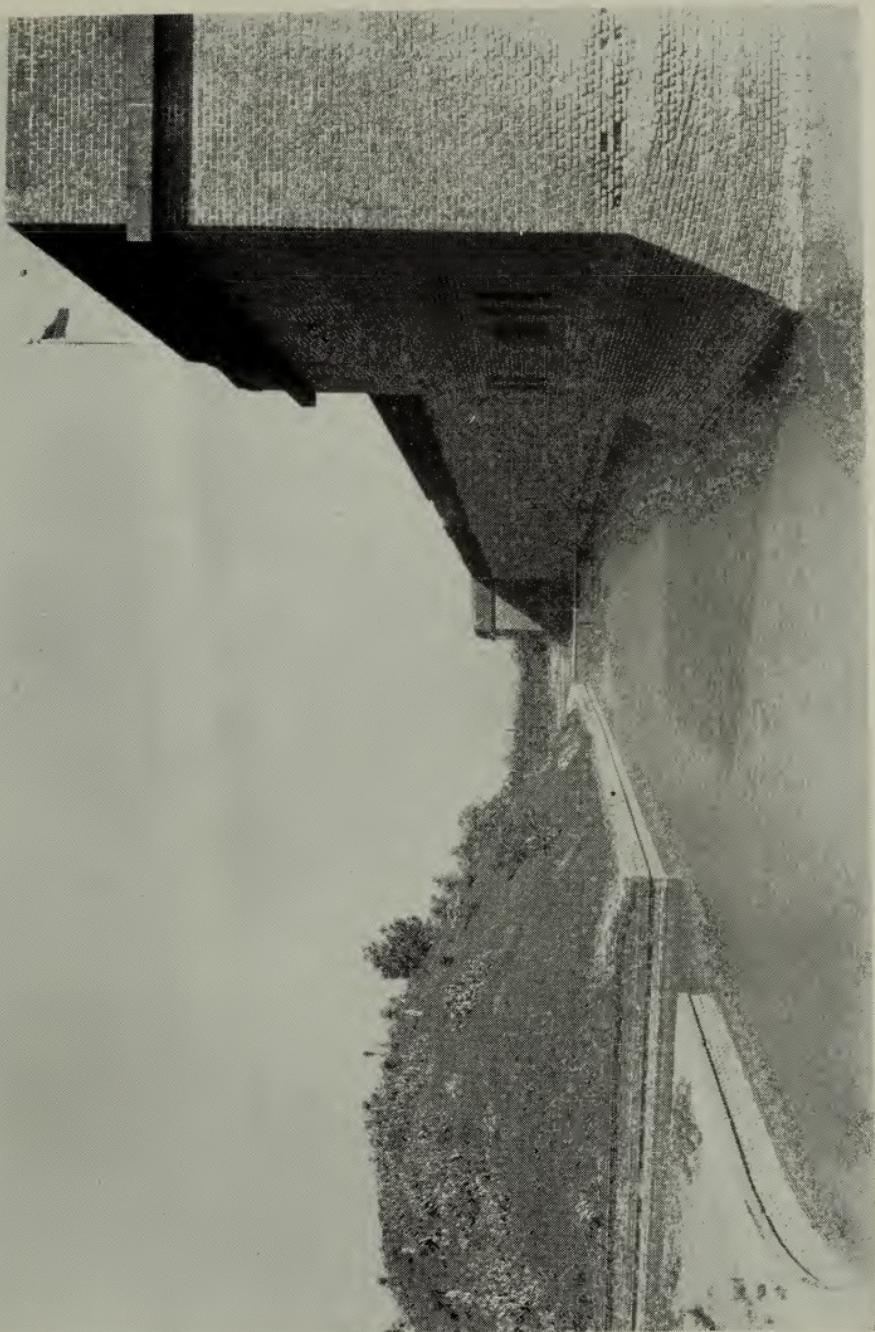
I have the honour to inform the Department that I have this day ordered Lt. Lee to proceed to Hampton Roads and report himself to Capt. Talcott for duty agreeably to the instructions from the Department under date of the 26 March last.

Lee's first tour of duty in the army was ended, and he left Cockspur Island, more experienced, more mature, and better equipped for his duties, having profited by the practical problems he had encountered there. The days of his apprenticeship were over.

Lee's Farewell to Fort Pulaski

Thirty full years were to elapse after that warm spring day in 1831, when young Lieutenant Lee joyously turned his face toward Virginia, before the seasoned and distinguished soldier was again to set foot upon the marshy soil of Cockspur Island. The passing of the years had brought many changes at the scene of his youthful apprenticeship. Major constructional work at Fort Pulaski had been completed for 14 years, and the red and gray brick structure reared its ponderous mass over the foundations he had surveyed and the excavations he had commenced so long before. All of the temporary frame structures that he could recall on the island were gone. The construction shops, the laborers' barracks, and the officers' quarters, where he had spent many an isolated and lonely hour, which all had stood once a short distance to the northwest of the fort site, had long since disappeared. Viewed in retrospect by the 54-year-old officer, the appearance of the island could barely have been more familiar than on that cold

Rear wall of the fort, showing the moat, bastions, drawbridge, and sole entrance through the sally port



November day in 1829 when he first saw it. The fort, however, the object of this long deferred return visit, now reassuringly raised its low lying bulk above the faded November marsh. Of it, he soon made a brief but professional inspection.

The deep gravity of the circumstances of Lee's second and final trip to Cockspur Island was in sharp contrast to any youthful forebodings he may have had momentarily upon his first arrival at a strange and isolated post 30 years previously. His hurried visit to Cockspur, in November 1861, was for a far different purpose than had been his sojourn there in 1829-1831. The long feared break between the North and South had finally occurred, and by the fall of 1861 the early movements and campaigns of the War between the States were already past history. Following the secession of South Carolina in December 1860, Georgia had become alarmed for the safety of her own undefended coast and had dispatched a detachment of her State militia to seize Fort Pulaski on January 3, 1861.

Upon Georgia's secession later in that month, her militia in garrison at Fort Pulaski was mustered into the Confederate service, and measures were hurriedly taken to strengthen the armament of the fortification in the face of the impending Federal naval offensive along the southeastern coast. On November 7 this offensive suddenly struck the South Carolina coast not far from Fort Pulaski, and the Federal fleet succeeded in capturing the Confederate forts at the entrance of strategic Port Royal Sound. At this crucial moment, on the day following the unexpected Confederate disaster, Gen. Robert E. Lee, Confederate States Army, assumed command of the defense of the southeastern coast. Within 3 days, in his desperate determination "to push forward the defenses of Charleston and Savannah," he was at Fort Pulaski. His urgent and unexpected visit was for the purpose of giving personal instructions regarding the strengthening of the defenses of a fortification he had commenced over a quarter century before for the United States, but had never seen since its completion.

General Lee, who had just conducted his first major campaign for the Confederacy in western Virginia, had been selected personally by Jefferson Davis as the most capable officer at hand for the command of the endangered southeastern coast.⁸ During the fall of 1861, President Davis had become increasingly concerned over the weak and unorganized condition of the Confederate land and naval forces along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. The appearance of the Federal fleet off Port Royal Sound at the beginning of November, forced him to make an immediate military reorganization of the Confederate forces in that now vulnerable region. Accordingly, on November 5, the "coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida" were "constituted a military department." On the same day, and to his astonishment, Lee was assigned to this new and difficult command, "in order to . . . concentrate all . . . [the Confederate] forces at any point that might be attacked." Hurrying to South Carolina, he arrived 2 days later, at the height of the overwhelming Federal naval attack against the Southern forts on Port Royal Sound.

By November 8 Lee had established his headquarters at Coosawatchie, near the scene of the Confederate disaster on the coast. From this tiny station, on the line of the Charleston and Savannah Railroad, he next day notified Secretary Benjamin in Richmond, that his immediate plan of defense was "to collect troops to defend the line of the railroad and to push forward the defenses of Charleston and Savannah." This emergency course of action, to organize the scattered Confederate forces and to strengthen the defenses of the two strategic ports, was gradually accepted by Lee as his permanent plan of defense. Its execution quickly brought him to Savannah late on the Sabbath evening of November 10 for an inspection of the city's defenses and Fort Pulaski during the following day.⁹

Accompanied by Brig. Gen. Alexander R. Lawton, commanding the Confederate forces at Savannah, and his staff, General Lee

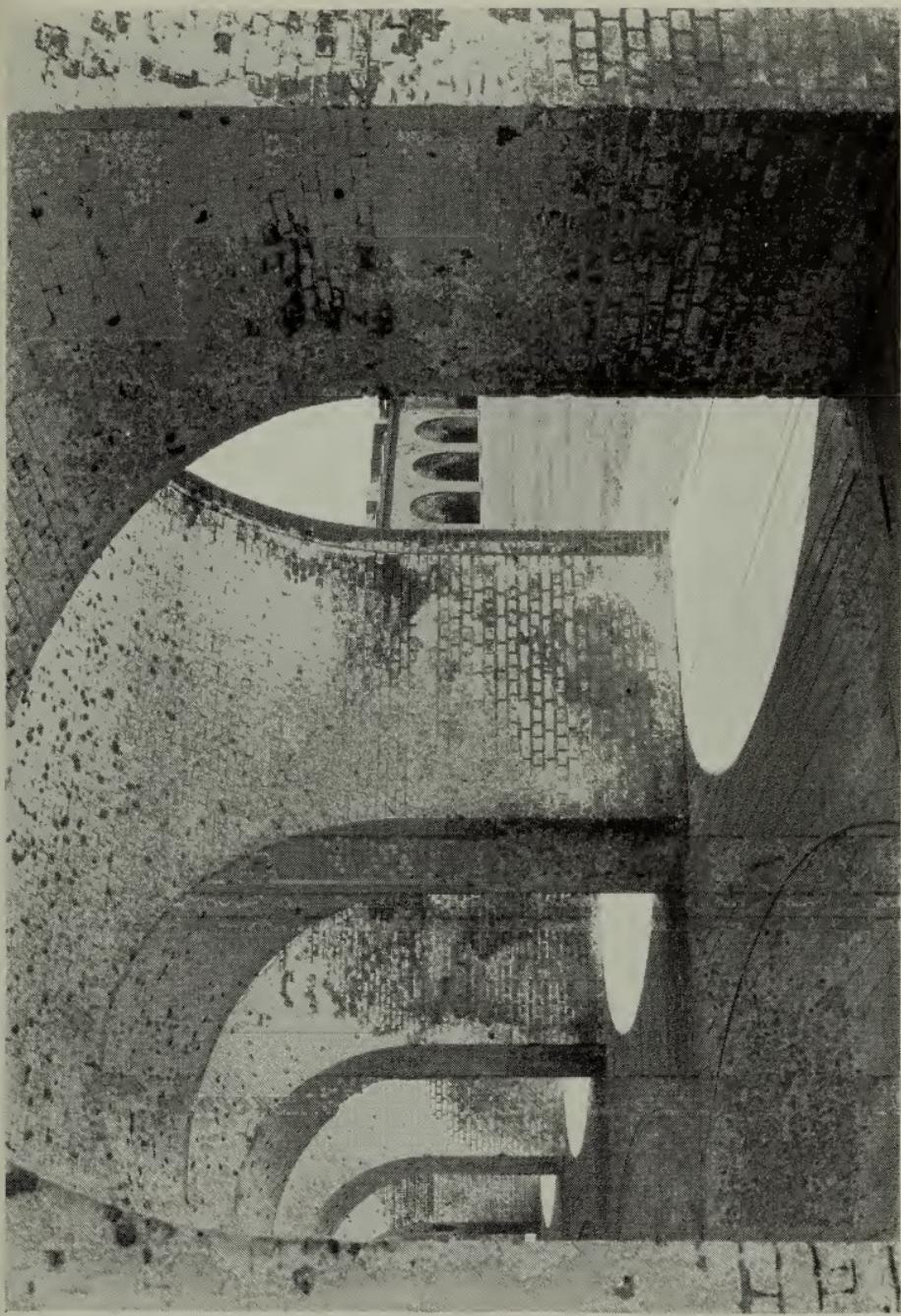
and his aides were transported by the tiny paddle-wheel river steamer *Ida*, on the hasty 25-mile round trip over the mud red waters of the broad Savannah. Landing at the North Wharf on Cockspur Island, from the main channel of the river, the party walked the short distance to Fort Pulaski. Here they were welcomed by youthful Maj. Charles H. Olmstead, commanding the detachments of the First Volunteer Georgia Infantry then in garrison at the fort. The formalities of receiving such distinguished visitors were soon concluded. Then the 25-year-old officer conducted General Lee and his party on a careful tour of the fort and the island.

Major Olmstead became colonel of his regiment in December 1861 and was in command of the Confederate garrison at Fort Pulaski when it was bombarded and forced to surrender by Federal forces on April 10–11, 1862. Many years afterwards he wrote an interesting account of the last visit of General Lee to Cockspur Island on that early November day in 1861. Colonel Olmstead recalled that

Prior to the closing of the [Savannah] river [about November 24, when Confederate log obstructions were completed to prevent the passage of Federal gunboats], General Robt. E. Lee, who was then in command of the Military District of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, visited the Fort and gave instructions for further defensive work to be done—traverses to be built on the ramparts between the guns, ditches dug in the parade to catch shells, the light colonnade in front of the officers quarters to be torn down, blindages of heavy timber to be erected before the casemate doors around the inner circuit of the Fort, and these to be covered by several feet of earth.

It is interesting to quote a remark of Gen'l Lee's at this time. Pointing to the nearest part of Tybee Island, 1700 yards away, he said, "Colonel, they will make it very warm for you with shells from that point but they cannot breach at that distance." From 800 to 900 yards was then laid down in the books as the extreme range at which a wall of good masonry could be attacked with any prospect of success, but up to the Siege of Pulaski, so far as the writer [Olmstead] knows, no fortification had ever been subjected to the fire of rifled guns. Their power against

A view from the great brick archways of the casemates into the parade



masonry was yet an unknown quantity . . . [Of especial interest is the fact that from the exact point on Tybee Island referred to by Lee in 1861, Federal batteries of rifled cannon successfully breached the walls of Fort Pulaski in 1862].

Immediately after General Lee's return to the city [Savannah] steps were taken to supply the timber required for the work he laid out. Rafts were brought down the South Channel [of the Savannah River] and from thence by a small canal on the South-side of the island into the moat. The whole garrison was put to work and to such good purpose, with such hearty good will, that everything contemplated was practically completed when the bombardment actually began [on April 10, 1862].¹⁰

Especially observant of his famous visitor's every action during that last momentous inspection, Colonel Olmstead also has left an unusual anecdote concerning an occurrence of the day, which vividly illustrates Lee's gracious humanity even while preoccupied with pressing military problems. The exciting news of his arrival had soon spread throughout the small island. Particularly stirred by Lee's unexpected return was a former long-time and humble employee at the fort, picturesque old Francis J. Cercopoly. Serving in the past alternately as captain of the project's steam-boat or "tender," and as a general utility hand, he had begun his intermittent work on the island in Major Babcock's administration. During the years of Lee's early tour of duty on the island, 1829-1831, the young officer of Engineers was pleasantly associated with this colorful boatman, who had drifted up the coast from Florida where his Latin ancestors had settled. Cercopoly now put Lee's ability for remembering names and faces to a remarkable test. Hoping to be recognized, he hurried to station himself at a point Lee must pass in his tour of the island. To the old fellow's delight, the official party had hardly come abreast of the spot before Lee paused, glanced searchingly at the old boat captain, and then rushed forward to greet him warmly. Lee instantly called him by name, although 30 years had elapsed since the officer had left the island and had seen his humble friend's aged and weatherbeaten face.¹¹

A short time afterward, Lee completed his instructions to Colonel Olmstead regarding "the preparation and arrangement of Fort Pulaski" for the siege already threatened by the Federal advance on the coast. Then, with a farewell glance around the fort and island he was never to see again, Lee and his party embarked for the return trip to Savannah. Although he continued in command of the coastal defenses in the area for 3 months longer, General Lee was too occupied with his general plan of defense to visit Fort Pulaski personally again during the period. Nevertheless, he kept a vigilant eye upon the reports regarding measures taken in accordance with his orders for strengthening the great brick fortification at the mouth of the Savannah.

Within 2 days of his inspection of Fort Pulaski, General Lee undertook a general survey of the other Confederate coastal defenses between Charleston and Fernandina, Fla. En route south from his headquarters at Coosawhatchie, he passed through Savannah, on November 18, but was then too busy to give further attention to the defense of Fort Pulaski. However, as a result of the coastal survey, upon his return to Savannah 3 days later, he notified the War Department in Richmond of the confirmation of his previous opinion that the "entrance to Cumberland Sound and Brunswick and the water approaches to Savannah [including Fort Pulaski] and Charleston are the only points which it is proposed to defend."

In the midst of a series of arduous trips Lee now undertook between Savannah and Charleston in order to supervise the hurried defense measures along the coast, he did not overlook the work under way to strengthen Fort Pulaski. Five days after Federal forces occupied Tybee Island, opposite the fort, on November 24, General Lee from Savannah informed Secretary Benjamin that while the "preparation and arrangement of Fort Pulaski ordered on my first arrival [at Savannah on November 10-11] have progressed slowly . . . I do not think the passage of the [Savannah] river can be forced. . . ."

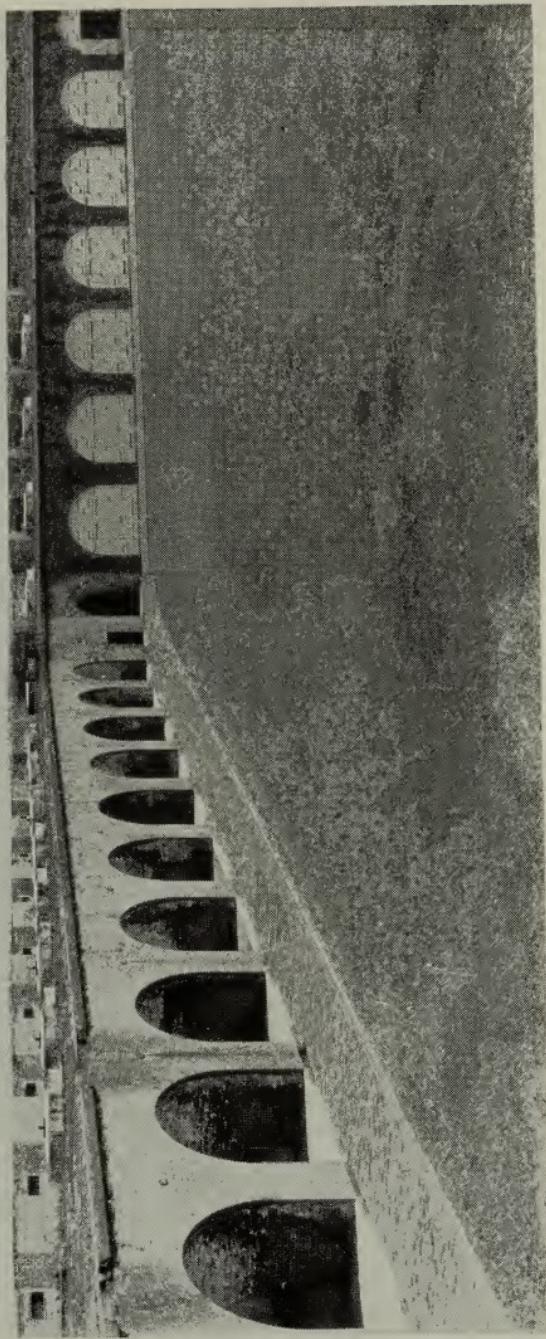
Following another tour of the coast between Charleston and Fernandina early in January 1862, and from observation of Federal fleet movements in the area, Lee became satisfied that an attack near Savannah was imminent. Late in the month, on the 28th, he wrote from Coosawhatchie to his wife: "There now seem to be indications of a movement against Savannah. The enemy's gunboats are pushing up the creeks to cut off communication between the city and Fort Pulaski on Cockspur Island. Unless I have better news, I must go there [Savannah] today."¹²

Realizing the necessity for constant supervision of the defense measures under way at Savannah and Fort Pulaski, Lee transferred his headquarters from Coosawhatchie to Savannah early in February. By the middle of the month, establishment of Federal batteries at Venus Point on the Savannah River, a short distance above Fort Pulaski, prevented the return to Savannah of the little Confederate steamer *Ida*, on one of her frequent trips to the fort and communication by the river between Savannah and Cockspur Island had been cut.

Under the circumstances, there was little that Lee could do further to assist Colonel Olmstead in the defense of Fort Pulaski. However, on February 17, by a messenger through the marshes, Lee sent these final instructions for the protection of the fort to its brave young commander:

Colonel: From the position the enemy has taken in the Savannah River, it becomes necessary that you look to your defense in that direction. I therefore recommend that, if necessary for that purpose, you shift some of your barbette guns [those on top of the fort] to the gorge [rear wall] of the work, and the casemates [bombproof rooms] in the northwest angle, which bear up the river, be provided with guns. I would also recommend that the parapets of the mortar batteries be carried all around, so that the mortars can be protected from the fire up the river as well as from Tybee Island, and that everything be done to strengthen the defenses of your work in the rear.

As far as it is possible your safety will be anxiously cared for, and for the present your communication with the city [Savan-



Looking across one corner of the parade toward a section of open casemates and a contrasting tier in which the wooden casemate fronts have been reconstructed

nah] will have to be by light boats over the marsh . . . or by any other mode by which you can better accomplish it.¹³

As the late February days of anxiety for the Confederate forces preparing the defenses of Savannah drew slowly to a close, General Lee's difficult assignment on the southeastern coast also neared its end. Signs that the slow-moving Federal naval and land operations in the Savannah area were finally organized for an actual attack were many. The Confederate situation between Savannah and the coast was so filled with danger that by February 23 Lee had begun to believe that Fort Pulaski "may in time be reduced."¹⁴ While renewing his efforts to complete his defensive system of earth batteries and waterway obstructions in front of Savannah, President Davis suddenly called him to Richmond on March 2. Leaving Savannah on March 3, General Lee was a few days afterwards assigned to the command of the operations of all Confederate armies, and his task of preparing defenses for the southeastern coast was over.

Defense measures undertaken at Fort Pulaski by his direction did not, of course, prevent the surrender of that fortification to Federal forces on April 11. However, this eventuality, which he previously feared would occur, was accomplished through unforeseen military developments beyond his control. Yet the main defense system between Savannah and the sea, which he commenced, proved so effective that it held the encircling Federal forces at bay until Sherman entered the city late in 1864. Regardless of the material worth of Lee's physical accomplishments while in command of the southeastern military department, the personal experience he gained in directing scattered armed forces and solving problems of defense during this second period of training on the Georgia coast was later of considerable value to him in his larger responsibility as the Confederate commander in chief.

Notes

¹ Engineer Order No. 8, August 11, 1829, Engineer Order Book, No. 2, pp. 75-76, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, United States Army, Division of War Department Archives, The National Archives, Washington, D. C.

² Cf., Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee, a Biography* (N. Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), I, p. 95. (Hereafter cited as Freeman, *Lee*.)

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

⁷ R. E. Lee to Eliza A. Mackay, April 13, 1831; used with personal permission of Mrs. Frank Screven, Savannah, Ga., owner of the original letter, as granted the National Park Service in 1934.

Lee apparently gave similar original copies of his sketch of the terrapin and alligator to both Catherine Mackay, whose descendant, Mrs. Screven, now owns the Mackay copy; and also to Sara Anna Minis, of Savannah, whose descendant, Mrs. C. F. Goodrich of Princeton, N. J., owns the Minis copy. Reproductions of the sketch may be seen in this booklet, and facing page 448 in R. E. Lee, Jr., *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* (N. Y., Doubleday, Page and Co., 1924, 2d. ed.; hereafter cited as Lee, *Recollections*). An interesting account of the Minis copy is given on pages 448-449 of the latter.

⁸ Freeman, *Lee*, pp. 606-607.

⁹ *The Charleston Mercury* (Charleston, S. C.), November 13, 1861.

¹⁰ Charles H. Olmstead, "Fort Pulaski," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1917, p. 102.

¹¹ Col. Charles H. Olmstead to (Mrs.) Florence Olmstead (his wife), November 21, 1861; used with personal permission of Miss Florence Olmstead, Savannah, Ga., owner of the original letter, as granted the National Park Service in 1934.

¹² Lee, *Recollections*, p. 62.

¹³ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Ser. I, Vol. VI, p. 389.

¹⁴ R. E. Lee to G. W. C. Lee, February 23, 1862, cited in Freeman, *Lee*, p. 627.

National Park Service
Popular Study Series

- No. 1. Winter Encampments of the Revolution.
- No. 2. Weapons and Equipments of the Early American Soldiers.
- No. 3. Wallpaper News of the Sixties.
- No. 4. Prehistoric Cultures in the Southeast.
- No. 5. Mountain Speech in the Great Smokies.
- No. 6. New Echota, Birthplace of the American Indian Press.
- No. 7. Hot Shot Furnaces.
- No. 8. Perry at Put in Bay: Echoes of the War of 1812.
- No. 9. Wharf Building of a Century and More Ago.
- No. 10. Gardens of the Colonists.
- No. 11. Robert E. Lee and Fort Pulaski.

